

WILLIAM WINTER: CRITIC OF THE BROWN DECADES

BY

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IF ANY student of the theatre were to name the half-dozen outstanding critics in the history of American drama, his list would somewhere include the name of William Winter. If he were to limit his period to the Brown Decades, from 1865 to 1895, there is little doubt that Winter would be his single choice.

The sheer volume of Winter's writings constitutes a claim to recognition. During each theatrical season for nearly half a century, he made almost daily contributions to the columns of *The New York Tribune*. At various times throughout his career he wrote regularly for several magazines including, among others, *The Critic*, *The North American Review*,

Harper's Weekly, *Collier's*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. He published twenty-seven books on the theatre, beginning in 1881 with *The Jeffersons* which traces the history of the famous acting family both in England and America, and ending with the massive two-volume *Life of David Belasco* published posthumously in 1918. He edited and adapted numerous plays, and he was besides in his own time a poet of considerable reputation.

Today Winter stands as the most eminent example of a kind of theatrical critic who is non-existent in modern journalism. For here is a writer who extravagantly praised or violently con-



demned in "good set terms." Spurning safe generalities as cowardly and ineffective, he never failed to direct his comments at particular personalities. Evidence that his judgments were respectfully, even anxiously, received is furnished in the Kaufman and Hart play, *The Fabulous Invalid*. The first scene is a New York opening in 1900 at which both actors and producers are apprehensive of what Winter will say.

I

Producers, of course, are still lamenting that the critics can ruin the run of a play. But when did you ever see in Burns Mantle's column such an announcement as this: "Next Saturday evening the stage of the Broadway Theater is to be disgraced with the vulgar and disreputable farce of 'Pink Dominoes'?"¹ Or when did even George Jean Nathan include in an advance notice such statements as these?

The play is a low, vulgar, stupid libel on American society; and if the community—as we believe—respects itself, Mr. Daly will be permitted to present it to empty benches. . . . We earnestly hope, therefore, that Mr. Daly's production of "Uncle Sam" will be a disastrous failure, such as will teach a lesson to him and to the impertinent little Frenchman who wrote it.²

Early in his career Winter became convinced that satirical ridicule is the one always dangerous weapon in fighting what is immoral or inartistic, a conviction to which he steadfastly adhered throughout his life. He tersely dismissed one incompetent actress by writing: "Her success consisted in the fact that she did not break down."³ He said of T. W. Keene's performance of Richard III:

Its locomotive peculiarities suggest the Pantoloon of the pantomime. This *Gloster* impels himself by means of a skating motion

of the legs combined with a wriggling motion of the body, so that he appears to be afflicted simultaneously with sciatica, bunions, rickets, heaves, and St. Vitus's dance.⁴

And he found Cora Brown Potter and Kyrle Bellew "about as interesting as a couple of grasshoppers would be arranging their stridulous loves in the hollow of a cabbage leaf."⁵ Commenting on the program notes which E. H. Sothern and Julia Marlowe furnished for their production of *John the Baptist*, Winter wrote:

Mr. Sothern's exploration of Scripture and Sudermann had determined that Salome and John are celestial bearers of a message of love, commissioned to instruct the community that love is "not altogether lascivious and sensual," but really a good thing. . . . "This matter," he asseverated, ought really "to be explained," and there was no place as good as the theater for preaching sermons. He declared (generous soul!) that he would preach them, and that Miss Marlowe likewise would exhort the populace, she too having received the light from on high. Mr. Sothern did not disguise his opinion that Miss Marlowe's Salome dance was, perhaps, a trifle middle-aged as a saltatory feat, but he deemed it an edifying performance and calculated to do wonders in the service of morality. . . . These little gems of thought which actors contribute to the public information are useful in many ways, especially as side-lights on the mental conditions of their authors.⁶

It must not be assumed by any means, however, that Winter was exclusively a carping critic. He made a general practice of restricting his sarcasm to those plays and performances which he felt were detrimental to the public welfare. When, on the other hand, he discovered an actor or producer or dramatist who made it his purpose to exert an ennobling influence upon his audience, who presented a "delicately exaggerated" picture of life with sufficient artistry to

¹ *The New York Tribune*, XXXVII (February 13, 1875), 5.

² *Ibid.*, XXXII (March 6, 1873), 4.

³ *Ibid.*, XXXII (December 19, 1872), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, XLIII (February 3, 1884), 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, LII (December 13, 1892), 6.

⁶ William Winter, *The Wallet of Time* (1913), II, 113-114.

render his efforts effective, Winter's praise must have warmed to the same degree that his condemnation chilled. And there is no doubt that a group of important players, among them Ada Rehan, Mary Anderson, John McCullough, Helena Modjeska, even Booth and Irving, are in some measure indebted to Winter, both for the popularity they enjoyed while they were living and for the fact that their names are still remembered now that they are dead. Throughout his life Winter praised in flowery Victorian language. Thus he declared that Ada Rehan's great success in the roles of Katherine and Viola was due to the "profound sincerity of her feeling,—over which her glee was seen to play, as moonlight plays upon the rippling surface of the ocean depth."⁷ And about the memory of Mary Anderson he felt "an atmosphere of gentle loveliness, affecting the mind like a strain of music heard at a distance on a moonlit summer sea."⁸

II

To such a theatre as these actors represented—to the theatre of Booth and Irving and Charlotte Cushman—he was zealously devoted. In fact he dedicated his life to winning for *it* and for *them* a respected place in the community. For Winter was ever the actors' champion. He interested himself in the physical conditions under which they worked; he defended them against the dictatorial stage-manager; he upheld their moral standards, and used his influence upon every possible occasion to gain them social recognition. He often lamented that most theatre buildings give so little attention to the comfort and convenience of the actor. The opening of a new theatre with ample arrangements behind the curtain as well as in front of it

called for a special article in the *Tribune*. He once told with fitting indignation how on a vaudeville tour Mlle. Fritz Scheff had been expected to change her costumes in a dressing room that remained uncleared after having been occupied by a trained pig act. Before the existence of Actors Equity, he constantly advocated that producers be obliged to pay some salary during the rehearsal period, especially to the minor actors who suffered most from long rehearsals and short runs.

When some unsuspecting clergyman happened to attack the acting profession, Winter had a capital opportunity for showing his colors. During one period he kept a clipping file of all the crimes and errors of the church, and on such an occasion he merely retaliated by printing a few of them. One of his books contains seven-and-a-half pages of such items as these:

On April 21 Bishop Wesley J. Grimes, of Atlanta, Georgia, was arrested in Camden, New Jersey, on a warrant issued by Justice Miller of Jersey City, on complaint of Rev. J. H. Morgan, of Bordentown, New Jersey, charged with having stolen \$150 from the Super-annuated Ministers' Fund.⁹

On October 7 Rev. DeWitt Clinton Sharpe, of Schenectady, New York, was sentenced by Justice Van Kirke to three and one half years' imprisonment in the penitentiary for the crime of abducting, for immoral purposes, a girl, Miss ———, aged fourteen.¹⁰

While he did not intend to represent the theatre as devoid of blemish, he was happy to point out that its history "contains no such record of iniquity in any period as that which startles and shocks the reader of the history of the Church."¹¹

III

To appreciate Winter's critical theories it is always necessary to keep in mind

⁷ William Winter, *Shadows of the Stage* (1895), III, 44.

⁸ William Winter, *Other Days* (1908), p. 255.

⁹ William Winter, *The Wallet of Time* (1913), II, 624.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 646.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, II, 648.

the high opinion he entertained of the influence of the theatre. He believed that the stage is an institution higher than any amusement and that it exerts an influence upon society "second only to that of the hearthstone," a conviction expressed again and again in his criticisms. Growing up in the days of the great actor managers, Macready, Charles Kean, Forrest, and later observing the success with which Booth, Irving, and others managed their own companies, he considered the actor the rightful custodian of the theatre and, therefore, a person of tremendous influence. He maintained that the actor has the power to be either a public benefactor or a great evil force and that members of the theatrical profession must realize and accept the responsibility their position entails. It was his contention that the purpose of acting is not proclamation of the actor's talents. He insisted rather that the actor should be concerned with exerting a beneficial influence upon the public, attempting always to check the gross and degrading forces that are ever active upon society. It was his opinion that mere technical skill counts for little. The actor who does not radiate more than artistic proficiency can impart nothing of spiritual or mental value, and so fails in the demands of his office. Thus the true greatness of Mary Anderson's impersonations of Hermione and Perdita lay not in the exquisite artistry with which she assumed the two characters, but in her "denotement of the elevating loveliness of the human soul."

Winter believed that Mary Anderson's success was due not to beauty, nor to caprice, nor even to artistic skill, but rather to the noble mind that lay behind her artistry. It was, moreover, one of his critical tenets that the great and good artist is first of all a great and good man. He could not agree with some other critics that the personality of the artist

and his creation of art are entirely distinct. He was willing to admit that a work of art should be judged as a work of art and nothing else, but he contended that the moral and spiritual and intellectual being of the artist is reflected in his work; the one outshines the other and cannot be concealed. Since he recognized that either great character or great artistry tends to palliate defects, he could overlook (as many critics cannot) technical deficiencies where there seemed to be a spirit of beauty and nobility. He was, on the other hand, the more willing to endure Swift's misanthropy because of his literary genius. But Mrs. Patrick Campbell he found altogether unacceptable because he considered her neither a great actress nor a great woman.

Perhaps the most interesting personality to consider at this point is Sarah Bernhardt, who vividly illustrates Winter's principle that the acting is the actor. She proved to his entire satisfaction that a selfish frivolous woman cannot hide herself behind even a perfect technique. He found in the "divine Sarah" nothing to admire except her consummate theatrical skill and her fascinating personality. Writing of her first appearance in America, he said she was undoubtedly a genius within a limited range, but that genius is not necessarily greatness and that her art was not of the highest order. He regretted that such splendid talents should be possessed by a woman so insincere and artificial, one who did not and (at least in his opinion) could not represent characters of any exaltation; one who by making house pets of tigers and sleeping in coffins had made a name which should have stood for something fine, a symbol of affectation and extravagance. He felt that her most successful roles were carnal images, characterized by nothing finer than sexual passion, and that to see her in these was to see all

that her nature had the power to dis-close.¹²

He was, of course, not in agreement with most critics in his judgment of Bernhardt. While his contemporaries rhapsodized without reservation, Winter considered her only an expert craftsman, in no measure an actress comparable to Charlotte Cushman, Ada Rehan, or Ellen Terry. Her two finest qualities, intelligence and passion, she was willing to vitiate on a series of repulsive characters illumining that which was mentally and spiritually degrading. She failed to realize her possibilities as an actress because she failed to realize her possibilities as a woman. Winter felt that no one was ever better in mind or spirit from seeing Bernhardt, a fact that he could not ignore in making a critical estimate of her work.

Similarly, Winter maintained that Edwin Forrest's service to the theatre consisted only in improving the art of acting for the lower order of public intelligence. Among this class of theatre-goers he was idolized, but to others he was usually superfluous. Winter termed him a "muscular chieftain," considering his principal quality to be a kind of animal splendor which never transcended the bounds of prosaic realism. He declared Forrest's career a "magnificent failure" because his existence was a "tempest." He scored the actor's selfishness, his conceit, his explosive temper, his lack of dignity, although in so doing he incurred the wrath of a considerable number of Forrest's followers.

Even though Winter often declared that his reviews were written for the community and not for the theatrical profession; he was, nevertheless, an expert judge of acting technique. When he found a young actor promising enough to warrant the effort, he could instruct and encourage in a manner that no

longer prevails among dramatic critics. He advised Wilson Barrett, for example, to overcome a tendency to preach and pose in somewhat "pretty" attitudes of physical display. Especially since Barrett did not possess a mobile countenance nor a flexible body Winter thought he should attempt to make up for these defects by diversity of action and by a rich and varied vocalism.¹³ He cautioned Ethel Barrymore at the time of her appearance in *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines* not to depend entirely upon youth and buoyant personality, but to learn the techniques of her profession thoroughly.¹⁴ He made suggestions to Robert Mantell regarding his make-up as King Lear. The too ample beard tended to cover his facial expression and to muffle his voice.¹⁵

Winter could also recreate in his writings with a vividness almost unsurpassed in theatrical commentaries, the performance of a James W. Wallack as the melodramatic Fagin in *Oliver Twist*, of a Charlotte Cushman as the Meg Merrilies of *Guy Mannering*, or of a Richard Mansfield as the crook-backed Gloucester. His many years of regular playgoing and his amazing erudition in theatrical history enabled him to judge most performances upon a comparative basis. Then, too, it must be remembered that he wrote of a theatre in which the actor was paramount. Until the close of the century the performance, not the play, was the thing. In the days before Ibsen, it was rhetoric that mattered. During the years of his ascendancy Winter did not need to consider whether the dramatist had spoken intelligently upon some social problem. And because he did not need to give time and space to a discussion of Fascism or labor unions, he did not need quickly to dispose of the actor in his last paragraph. In fact he frequently wrote his comments upon

¹² *The New York Tribune*, XL (November 9, 1880), 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, XLIV (November 15, 1884), 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, LXIV (November 16, 1904), 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, LXVI (November 9, 1906), 7.

the play itself before he went to the theatre so that all of his attention could be given to the performance and, incidentally, so that he could make his deadline and still catch the last ferry to his home on Staten Island.

With the coming of the problem play, with the passing of the grand style of acting, his authority began to decline. He wrote for a culture in which the social arbiters were Thomas Bailey Aldrich and James Russell Lowell, men who confused art with morality and who dictated that only that should be written which they were willing for their daughters to read. When the "delicate exaggerations" of Robertson and Gilbert were replaced by the realism of Pinero and Shaw, Winter ceased to comment intelligently. He could not tolerate the offensive Mrs. Tanqueray on the American stage. He could not appreciate a performance in which the conflict was psychological and in which the crises were not punctuated with flaring rhetoric. Victorian by temperament and training, adhering stubbornly to a single point of view, he remained unchanging in the face of a changing drama which was reflecting a changing day.

IV

Winter has a claim upon our interest because his reviews and his books constitute a storehouse of information for the stage historian; because he was recognizedly an excellent commentator on the theatre of Booth and Irving, and on the actors and acting that went into the making of that theatre. Furthermore, with a high and honest belief in the possibilities of the actor's profession, he did more than any other critic of his day to promote a recognition of the art of acting and of the dignity of the stage. Deducting all the obvious shortcomings of his later years, we may say that William Winter, the Victorian, stands, and must continue to stand, as the foremost theatrical critic of his time. If, toward the end of his career, the theatre had become to him a kind of den of iniquity, it still had the power of becoming an instrument of far greater good than its mercenary keepers could see or understand. And the ideals that he presented to those who were content to look upon the stage merely as a place of entertainment, moral or vile, might be heeded by many a critic of today and tomorrow.



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